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ANTHONY BENEZET

During the eighteenth century the Quakers gradually changed from the introspective state of seeking their own welfare into the altruistic mood of helping those who shared with them the heritage of being despised and rejected of men. After securing toleration for their sect in the inhospitable New World they began to think seriously of others whose lot was unfortunate. The Negroes, therefore, could not escape their attention. Almost every Quaker center declared its attitude toward the bondmen, varying it according to time and place. From the first decade of the eighteenth century to the close of the American Revolution the Quakers passed through three stages in the development of their policy concerning the enslavement of the blacks. At first they directed their attention to preventing their own adherents from participating in it, then sought to abolish the slave trade and finally endeavored to improve the condition of all slaves as a preparation for emancipation.

Among those who largely determined the policy of the Quakers during that century were William Burling¹ of Long Island, Ralph Sandiford of Pennsylvania, Benjamin Lay of Abington, John Woolman of New Jersey and Anthony Benezet of Philadelphia. Early conceiving an abhorrence to slavery, Burling denounced it by writing anti-slavery tracts and portraying its unlawfulness at the yearly meetings of the Quakers. Ralph Sandiford followed the same

¹ William Burling of Long Island was the first to conceive an abhorrence of slavery. Early in his career he began to speak of the wickedness of the institution at the yearly meetings of the Quakers. He wrote several tracts to publish to the world his views on this great question. His first tract appeared in 1718. It was addressed to the elders of the Friends to direct their attention to "the inconsistency of compelling people and their posterity to serve them continually and arbitrarily, and without any proper recompense for their services." See Clarkson's "History of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade," Volume I, pp. 146-147.

methods and in his "*Mystery of Iniquity*" published in 1729, forcefully exposed the iniquitous practice in a stirring appeal in behalf of the Africans.² Benjamin Lay, not contented with the mere writing of tracts, availed himself of the opportunity afforded by frequent contact with those in power to interview administrative officials of the slave colonies, undauntedly demanding that they bestir themselves to abolish the evil system.³ Struck by the wickedness of the institution while traveling through the South prior to

² After Burling came Ralph Sandiford, a merchant engaged in business in Philadelphia. This man attracted the attention of his friends because he declined the assistance offered him by persons sufficiently wealthy to establish him in life, merely because they had acquired their wealth by enslaving Negroes. He not only labored among his own people for the liberation of the slaves, but boldly appealed to others. He finally expressed his sentiments in a publication called the "*Mystery of Inquiry*," a brief treatise on the evil of the institution of slavery. The importance attached to this work is that Sandiford published it and circulated it at his own expense despite the fact that he had been threatened with prosecution by the judge. This pamphlet was written in correct and energetic style, abounding with facts, sentiments and quotations, which showed the virtue and talents of the author and made a forceful appeal in behalf of the blacks. See Clarkson's "*History of the Abolition of the Slave Trade*," Volume I, pp. 147-148.

³ Benjamin Lay, the next worker in this cause, lived at Abington, not far from Philadelphia. He was a man of desirable class and had access to the homes of some of the best people even when in England. He was not long in this country before he championed the cause of the slave. In 1737 he published his first treatise on slavery, distributing it far and wide, especially among the members of the rising generation. He traveled extensively through this country and the West Indies and personally took up the question of abolition with the governors of the slave colonies. It is doubtful, according to Clarkson, that he rendered the cause great service by this mission. This writer says that "in bearing what he believed to be his testimony against this system of oppression, he adopted sometimes a singularity of manner, by which, as conveying demonstration of a certain eccentricity of character, he diminished in some degree his usefulness to the cause which he had undertaken; as far indeed as this eccentricity might have the effect of preventing others from joining him in his pursuit, lest they should be thought singular also, so far it must be allowed that he ceased to become beneficial. But there can be no question, on the other hand, that his warm and enthusiastic manners awakened the attention of many to the cause, and gave them first impressions concerning it, which they never forgot, and which rendered them useful to it in the subsequent part of their lives." See Clarkson's "*History of Abolition of the African Slave Trade*," Vol. I, pp. 148-150.

the Revolution, John Woolman spent his remaining years as an itinerant preacher, urging the members of his society everywhere to eradicate the evil.⁴ Anthony Benezet, going a step further, rendered greater service than any of these as an anti-slavery publicist and at the same time persistently toiled as a worker among the Negroes.

Benezet was born in St. Quentin in Picardy in France in 1713. He was a descendant of a family of Huguenots who after all but establishing their faith in France saw themselves denounced and persecuted as heretics and finally driven from the country by the edict of Nantes. One of the reformer's family, François Benezet, perished on the scaffold at Montpellier in 1755, fearlessly proclaiming to the multitude of spectators the doctrines for which he had been condemned to die.⁵ Unwilling to withstand the imminent

⁴ John Woolman shared with Anthony Benezet the honor of being one of the two foremost workers in behalf of the oppressed race. He was born in Burlington County in New Jersey in 1720. When quite a youth he was deeply impressed with religion and resolved to live a righteous life. He was therefore in his twenty-second year made a minister of the gospel among the Quakers. Just prior to his entering upon the ministry there happened an incident which set him against slavery. Being a poor man he was working for wages as a bookkeeper in a store. "My employer," said he, "having a Negro woman sold her, and desired me to write a bill of sale, the man being waiting, who bought her. The thing was sudden, and though the thought of writing an instrument of slavery for one of my fellow-creatures made me feel uneasy, yet I remembered I was hired by the year, that it was my master who directed me to do it, and that it was an elderly man, a member of our Society, who bought her. So through weakness I gave way and wrote, but, at executing it, I was so afflicted in my mind, that I said before my master and the friend, that I believed slave-keeping to be a practice inconsistent with the Christian religion. This in some degree abated my uneasiness; yet, as often as I reflected seriously upon it, I thought I should have been clearer, if I had desired to have been excused from it, as a thing against my conscience; for such it was. And some time after this, a young man of our Society spoke to me to write a conveyance of a slave to him, he having lately taken a Negro into his house. I told him I was not easy to write it; for though many of our meeting, and in other places kept slaves, I still believed the practice was not right, and desired to be excused from the writing. I spoke to him in good will; and he told me that keeping slaves was not altogether agreeable to his mind, but that the slave being a gift to his wife he had accepted her." Moved thus so early in his life he developed into an ardent friend of the Negro and ever labored thereafter to elevate and emancipate them. See Clarkson's "History of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade."

⁵ Felice's "History of French Protestants."

persecution, however, John Stephen Benezet, Anthony's father, fled from France to Holland but after a brief stay in that country moved to London in 1715.

After being liberally educated by his father, Benezet served an apprenticeship in one of the leading establishments of London to prepare himself for a career in the commercial world. He had some difficulty, however, in coming to the conclusion that he would be very useful in this field. He, therefore, soon abandoned this idea and followed mechanical pursuits until he moved with his family to Philadelphia in 1731. There his brothers easily established themselves in a successful business and endeavored to induce Anthony to join them, but the youth was still of the impression that this was not his calling. His life's work was finally determined by his early connection with the Quakers, to the religious views and testimonies of whom he rigidly adhered. He continued his mechanical pursuit and later undertook manufacturing at Washington, Delaware, but feeling that neither of these satisfied his desire to be thoroughly useful he decided to return to Philadelphia to devote his life to religion and humanity.⁶

Benezet finally became a teacher. In this field he, for more than forty years, served in a disinterested and Christian spirit all who diligently sought enlightenment. He aimed to train up the youth in knowledge and virtue, manifesting in this position such "a rightness of conduct, such a courtesy of manners, such a purity of intention, and such a spirit of benevolence" that he attracted attention and ingratiated himself into the favor of all of those who knew him. He first served in this capacity in Germantown, working a part of his time as a proof reader. In 1742 he was chosen to fill a vacancy in the English department of the public school founded by charter from William Penn. After serving there satisfactorily twelve years he founded a female seminary of his own, instructing the daughters of the most aristocratic families of Philadelphia.⁷

⁶ Vaux, "Memoirs of the Life of Anthony Benezet," 64.

⁷ Special Report of the U. S. Com. of Education on the Schools of the District of Columbia, 1871, p. 362.

Benezet was a really modern teacher, far in advance of his contemporaries. Much better educated than most teachers of his time, he could write his own textbooks. He had an affectionate and fatherly manner and always showed a conscientious interest in the welfare of his pupils. "He carefully studied their dispositions," says his biographer, "and sought to develop by gentle assiduity the peculiar talents of each individual pupil. With some persuasion was his only incitement, others he stimulated to a laudable emulation; and even with the most obdurate he seldom, if ever, appealed to any other corrective than that of the sense of shame and the fear of public disgrace." In his teaching, too, he endeavored to make "a worldly concern subservient to the noblest duties and the most intensive goodness."⁸ In serious discussions like that of slavery he undertook to instill into the minds of his students firm convictions of the right, believing that in so doing he would greatly influence public sentiment when these properly directed youths should take their places in life.

This whole-souled energetic man, however, could not confine himself altogether to teaching. While following this profession he devoted so much of his time to philanthropic enterprises and reforms that he was mainly famous for his achievements in these fields. "He considered the whole world his country," says one, "and all mankind his brethren."⁹ Benezet was for several reasons interested in the man far down. In the first place, being a Huguenot, he himself knew what it is to be persecuted. He was, moreover, during these years a faithful coworker of the Friends who were then fearlessly advocating the cause of the down-trodden. He deeply sympathized, therefore, with the Indians. His work, too, was not limited merely to that of relieving individual cases of suffering but comprised also the task of promoting the agitation for respecting the rights of that people. Unlike most Americans, he had faith in the Indians, believing that if treated justly they would give the

⁸ "Slavery a Century ago," p. 16.

⁹ Vaux, "Memoirs of the Life of Anthony Benezet," 12.

whites no cause to fear them. When in 1763 General Amherst was at New York preparing to attack the Indians, Benezet addressed him an earnest appeal in these words: "And further may I entreat the general, for our blessed Redeemer's sake, from the nobility and humanity of his heart, that he would condescend to use all moderate measures if possible to prevent that prodigious and cruel effusion of blood, that deep anxiety of distress, that must fill the breast of so many helpless people should an Indian war be once entered upon?"¹⁰ Not long before his death Benezet expressed himself further on this wise in a work entitled "*Some Observations on the Situation, Disposition, and Character of the Indian Natives of the Continent.*"

Further evidence of Benezet's philanthropy was exhibited in his attitude toward certain Acadians who for political reasons were driven from their homes to Philadelphia in 1755. Devoid of the comforts of life in a foreign community, they were in a situation miserable to be told. Being of the same stock and speaking their language, Benezet took upon himself the task of serving as mediator between this deported group and the community. A man of high character and much influence, he easily obtained a relief fund with which he provided asylum for the decrepit, sustenance for the needy, and employment for those able to labor. He attended the sick, comforted the dying, and delivered over their remains the last tribute due the dead.¹¹

His sympathetic nature too impelled him to speak in behalf of the suffering soldiers of the American Revolution. Adhering to the faith of the Quakers, he could not but shudder at the horrors of that war. He was interested not only in the soldiers but also in the unfortunate Americans on whom they were imposed. He saw in the whole course of war nothing but bold iniquity and crass inconsistency of nations which professed to be Christian. To set forth the distress which such a state of the country caused him Bene-

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹¹ Clarkson, "History of the Abolition of the Slave Trade," 166; "Slavery a Century ago," 19-20.

zet wrote a dissertation entitled "*Thoughts on the Nature of War*," and distributed it among persons of distinction in America and Europe. In 1778 when the struggle for independence had reached a crisis he issued in the interest of peace with the enemy a work entitled "*Serious Reflections on the Times addressed to the Well-disposed of every Religious Denomination*." ¹²

Moved by every variety of suffering whenever and wherever found, Benezet's attention had during these years been attracted to a class of men much farther down than the lowliest of the lowly of other races. He had not been in this country long before he was moved to put forth some effort to alleviate the sufferings of those bondmen whose faces were black. In the year 1750, when the Quakers, although denouncing the evil of slavery here and there, were not presenting a solid front to the enemy, Anthony Benezet boldly attacked the slave trade, attracting so much attention that he soon solidified the anti-slavery sentiment of the Quakers against the institution.¹³ For more than thirty years thereafter he was a tireless worker in this cause, availing himself of every opportunity to impress men with the thought as to the wickedness of the traffic. In his class room he held up to his pupils the horrors of the system, always mentioned it in his public utterances, and seldom failed to speak of it when conversing with friends or strangers. Benezet set forth in the almanacs of the time accounts of the atrocities of those engaged in slavery and the slave trade and published and circulated numerous pamphlets ingeniously exposing their iniquities.¹⁴

Devoted as Benezet was to the cause of the blacks, he was not an ardent abolitionist like Garrison, who fifty years later fearlessly advocated the immediate destruction of the system. Benezet was primarily interested in the suppression of the slave trade. He hoped also to see the slaves

¹² Vaux, *Memoirs*, etc., 77.

¹³ "Slavery a Century ago," 23-24.

¹⁴ Some of these accounts appeared in the almanacs of Benjamin Franklin, who had made these publications famous.

gradually emancipated after having had adequate preparation to live as freedmen. Writing to Fothergill, Benezet expressed his concurrence with the former's opinion that it would be decidedly dangerous both to the Negroes and the masters themselves in the southern colonies, should the slaves be suddenly manumitted. Except in particular cases, therefore, even in the northern colonies the liberation of slaves in large numbers was not at first Benezet's concern. He believed that "the best endeavors in our power to draw the notice of the governments, upon the grievous iniquity and great danger attendant on a further prosecution of the slave trade, is what every truly sympathizing mind cannot but earnestly desire, and under divine direction promote to the utmost of their power." If this could be obtained, he believed the sufferings of "those already amongst us, by the interposition of the government, and even from selfish ends in their masters, would be mitigated, and in time Providence would gradually work for the release of those, whose age and situation would fit them for freedom." Benezet thought that this second problem could be solved by colonizing the Negroes on the western lands. "The settlements now in prospect to be made in that large extent of country," said he, "from the west side of the Allegany mountains to the Mississippi, on a breadth of four or five hundred miles, would afford a suitable and beneficial means of settlement for many of them among the white people, which would in all probability be as profitable to the negroes as to the new settlers." But he did not desire to take up time especially with matters of so remote a nature, it being indeed with reluctance that he took up at all a question which he would have avoided, "if there had been any person to whom he could have addressed himself with the same expectation, that what he had in view would have thereby been answered."¹⁵

Taking a more advanced position with this propaganda Benezet published in 1762 a work entitled "*A Short Account of that Part of Africa inhabited by Negroes, with general Observations on the Slave Trade and Slavery.*" "The end pro-

¹⁵ Vaux, *Memoirs*, etc., 29 et seq.

posed by this essay," says the author, "is to lay before the candid reader the depth of evil attending this iniquitous practice, in the prosecution of which our duty to God, the common Father of the family of the whole earth, and our duty of love to our fellow creatures, is totally disregarded; all social connection and tenderness of nature being broken, desolation and bloodshed continually fomented in those unhappy people's country." It was also intended, said he, "to invalidate the false arguments which are frequently advanced for the palliation of this trade, in hopes it may be some inducement to those who are not yet defiled therewith to keep themselves clear; and to lay before such as have unwarily engaged in it, their danger of totally losing that tender sensibility to the sufferings of their fellow creatures, the want whereof set men beneath the brute creation." ¹⁶

In the year 1769 appeared his "*Caution and Warning to Great Britain and her Colonies on the Calamitous State of the Enslaved Negroes in the British Dominions.*" Referring to this work, he says: "The intent of publishing the following sheets, is more fully to make known the aggravated iniquity attending the practice of the Slave Trade; whereby many thousands of our fellow creatures, as free as ourselves by nature and equally with us the subjects of Christ's redeeming Grace, are yearly brought into inextricable and barbarous bondage; and many; very many, to miserable and untimely ends." Fearlessly directing this as an attack on public functionaries he remarks: "How an evil of so deep a dye, hath so long, not only passed uninterrupted by those in power, but hath even had their countenance, is indeed surprising; and charity would suppose, must in a great measure have arisen from this, that many persons in government both of the Laity and Clergy, in whose power it hath been to put a stop to the Trade, have been unacquainted with the corrupt motives which gives life to it, and with the groans, the dying groans, which daily ascend to God, the common Father of mankind, from the broken

¹⁶ See Benezet's "Short Account, etc.," p. 2.

hearts of those his deeply oppressed creatures." Coming directly to the purpose in mind, however, the author declares: "I shall only endeavor to show from the nature of the Trade, the plenty which Guinea affords to its inhabitants, the barbarous treatment of the Negroes and the observations made thereon by authors of note, that it is inconsistent with the plainest precepts of the Gospel, the dictates of reason, and every common sentiment of humanity." ¹⁷

This work turned out to be the first really effective one of Benezet's writings, creating not a little sensation both on this continent and Europe. It was especially rousing to the Quakers here and abroad. The Yearly Meeting of London recommended in 1785 that all the quarterly meetings give this book the widest circulation possible. The Quakers in various parts accordingly approached numerous classes of persons, all sects and denominations, and especially public officials. Desiring also to reach the youth the agents for distribution visited the schools of Westminster, the Carter-House, St. Paul's, Merchant Tailors', Eton, Winchester, and Harrow. From among the youths thus informed came some of those reformers who finally abolished the slave trade in the English dominions.

The most effective of Benezet's works, however, was his "*An Historical Account of Guinea, its Situation, Produce, and the General Disposition of its Inhabitants, with an Enquiry into the Rise and Progress of the Slave Trade, its Nature and Calamitous Effect.*" This volume approached more nearly than his other writings what students of to-day would call a scientific treatise. The author devoted much time to the collection of facts and substantiated his assertions by quotations from the standard authorities in that field. While it added nothing really new to the argument already advanced, the usual theories were more systematically arranged and more forcefully set forth.¹⁸ "This book," says a writer, "became instrumental beyond any other work

¹⁷ See Benezet's "Caution, etc.," p. 3.

¹⁸ See Benezet's "An Historical Account, etc."

ever before published in disseminating a proper knowledge and detestation of this Trade.”¹⁹

The most important single effect the book had, was to convert Thomas Clarkson, who thereafter devoted his life to the cause of abolishing the slave trade. While a Senior Bachelor of Arts at the University of Cambridge, Clarkson had in 1784 distinguished himself by winning a prize for the best Latin dissertation. The following year a prize was offered for the best essay on the subject “*anne Liceat invitatos in servitutem dare,*” is it lawful to make slaves of others against their will? Knowing that he was then unprepared to compete, he hesitated to enter the contest, not wishing to lose the reputation he had so recently won. Yet owing to the fact that it was expected of him, he entered his name, actuated by no other motive than to distinguish himself as a scholar. As there was then a paucity of literature on slavery in England, his first researches in this field were not productive of gratifying results. “I was in this difficulty,” says Clarkson, “when going by accident into a friend’s house, I took up a newspaper there lying on the table. One of the first articles which attracted my notice was an advertisement of Anthony Benezet’s *‘Historical Account of Guinea.’* I soon left my friend and his paper, and, to lose no time, hastened to London to buy it. In this precious book I found almost all I wanted.” Clarkson easily won the first prize. Although Benezet himself did not live to see it, this volume converted to the cause of the oppressed race a man who as an author and reformer became one of the greatest champions it ever had.²⁰

Benezet continued to write on the slave trade, collecting all accessible data from year to year and publishing it whenever he could. He obtained many of his facts about the sufferings of slaves from the Negroes themselves, moving among them in their homes, at the places where they worked, or on the wharves where they stopped when traveling.

¹⁹ See Benezet’s “An Historical Account of Guinea.” Clarkson, “The History of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade,” I, 169.

²⁰ “Slavery a Century ago,” p. 4.

To diffuse this knowledge where it would be most productive of the desired results, he talked with tourists and corresponded with every influential person whom he could reach. Travelers who came into contact with him were given thoughts to reflect on, messages to convey or tracts to distribute among others who might further the cause. Hearing that Granville Sharp had in 1772 obtained the significant verdict in the famous Somerset case, Benezet wrote him, that this champion of freedom abroad might be enabled to cooperate more successfully with those commonly concerned on this side of the Atlantic.²¹ With the same end in view he corresponded with George Whitefield and John Wesley.²²

His connection with the work of George Whitefield was further extended by correspondence with the Countess of Huntingdon who had at the importunity of Whitefield established at Savannah a college known as the Orphan House, to promote the enlightenment of the poor and to prepare some of them for the clerical profession. Unlike Whitefield, the founder, who thought that the Negroes also might derive some benefit from this institution, the successors of the good man endeavored to maintain the institution by the labor of slaves purchased to cultivate the plantations owned by the institution. Benezet, therefore, wrote the Countess a brilliant letter pathetically depicting the misery she was unconsciously causing by thus encouraging slavery and the slave trade. He was gratified to learn from the distinguished lady that in founding the institution she had no such purpose in mind and that she would prohibit the wicked crime.²³

Learning that Abbé Raynal had exhibited in his celebrated work a feeling of sympathy for the African, Benezet sought in the same way to attach him more closely to the cause of prohibiting the slave trade. Observing that the slave trade which had because of the American Revolution

²¹ Vaux, "Memoirs of Anthony Benezet," 32.

²² *Ibid.*, 44.

²³ Vaux, "Memoirs, etc.," 42.

declined only to rise again after that struggle had ceased, Benezet addressed a stirring letter to the Queen of England, who on hearing from Benjamin West of the high character of the writer, received it with marks of peculiar condescension.

Let no casual reader of this story conclude that Benezet was a mere theorist or pamphleteer. He ever translated into action what he professed to believe. Knowing that the enlightenment of the blacks would not only benefit them directly but would also disprove the mad theories as to the impossibility of their mental improvement, Benezet became one of the most aggressive and successful workers who ever toiled among these unfortunates. As early as 1750 he established for the Negroes in Philadelphia an evening school in which they were offered instruction gratuitously. His noble example appealing to the Society of Friends, he encouraged them to raise a fund adequate to establishing a larger and well-organized school.²⁵ This additional effort, to be sure, required much of his time. When he discovered, however, that he could not direct the colored school and at the same time continue his female academy which he had conducted for three generations, he abandoned his own interests and devoted himself exclusively to the uplift of the colored people. In this establishment he received all the rewards he anticipated. It was sufficient for him finally to be able to say: "I can with truth and sincerity declare that I have found amongst the Negroes as great variety of talents, as among a like number of whites, and I am bold to assert, that the notion entertained by some, that the blacks are inferior in their capacities, is a vulgar prejudice, founded on the pride or ignorance of their lordly masters, who have kept their slaves at such a distance as to be unable to form a right judgment of them."²⁶

His devotion to this work was further demonstrated by another noble deed. His will provided that after the payment of certain legacies and smaller obligations his estate should at the death of his widow be turned over to the trus-

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁵ "The African Repository," IV, 61.

²⁶ "Slavery a Century ago," 25.

tees of the public school "to hire and employ a religious-minded person or persons to teach a number of negroe, mulatto, or Indian children, to read, write, arithmetic, plain accounts, needle work." "And," continued he, "it is my particular desire, founded on the experience I have had in that service, that in the choice of such tutor, special care may be had to prefer an industrious, careful person, of true piety, who may be or become suitably qualified, who would undertake the service from a principle of charity, to one more highly learned not equally disposed."²⁷

But this philanthropist's work was almost done. He was then seventy years of age and having been an earnest worker throughout his life he had begun to decline. One spring morning in the year 1784 it was spread abroad in Philadelphia that Anthony Benezet was seriously ill and that persons realizing his condition were apprehensive of his recovery. So disturbed were his friends by this sad news that they for several days besieged the house to seek, so to speak, the dying benediction of a venerable father. The same in death as he had been in life, he received their attentions with due appreciation of what he had been to them but exhibited at the same time in the presence of his Maker the deepest self-humiliation. "I am dying," said he, "and feel ashamed to meet the face of my Maker, I have done so little in his cause." Anthony Benezet was no more.

The honors which his admirers paid him were indicative of the high esteem in which they held the distinguished dead. Thousands of the people of Philadelphia followed his remains to witness the interment of all that was mortal of Anthony Benezet. Never had that city on such an occasion seen a demonstration in which so many persons of all classes participated. There were the officials of the city, men of all trades and professions, various sects and denominations, and hundreds of Negroes, "testifying by their attendance, and by their tears, the grateful sense they entertained of his pious efforts in their behalf."²⁸

C. G. WOODSON.

²⁷ Vaux, "Memoirs, etc.," 135.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 134.